

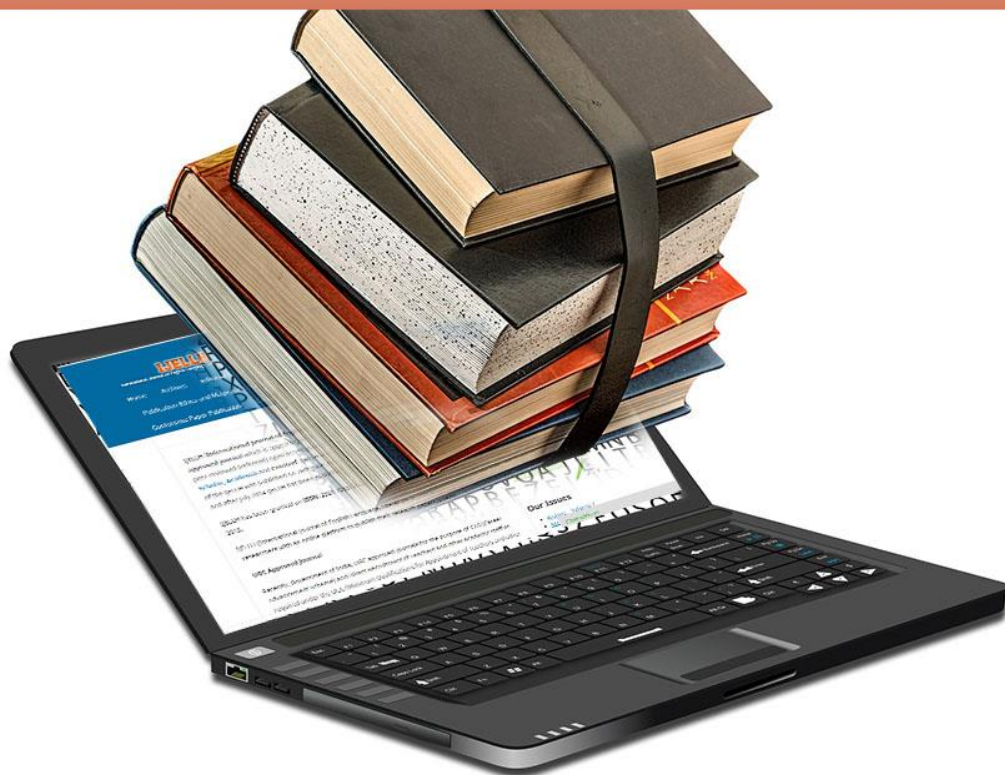
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The Personal is Political: Women Empowerment and Women's Writing Across Margins

Women empowerment is not an issue that can be confined to our domestic and professional lives alone. This concern extends beyond the contours of our societal grid and manifests itself in almost all societies across the globe. The personal is no more concealed within the codes of conduct that are imposed on women, because political escalation and intervention has unlocked new avenues for women. Participation of women in this development is an optimistic step towards empowerment. Such awareness is neither ambiguous nor unrealistic, but sincere and pragmatic. Women from the margins are connecting with the mainstream in voicing their opinions. They are futuristic in approach and courageous.

The contribution of literature towards women empowerment cannot be denied. Fictional and non-fictional works have both ignited passion among women to articulate their thoughts and value their judgement. Fictional and non-fictional works of female writers like Nawal El Saadawi, Tehmina Durrani, Toni Morrison, Faiqa Mansab, and Arundhati Roy have inculcated a new wave of activism among women by creating socio-political awareness among them. Impact of fiction on women empowerment is a sphere with infinite opportunities for creative output. This sphere has integrated women at large and unveiled

some issues that were previously overlooked. It has also drawn attention towards those aspects of womanhood that have been silenced and condemned by the leading hegemonic powers.

This paper researches about the importance of promoting literary scholarship and activities among women across the Indian societal structure and beyond. The aim is to promote gender inclusiveness at all levels and to develop better communication channels between privileged women and those dwelling on the fringes of the society by means of literary efforts and participation. If aim of all education is to discipline our minds for collective well-being of the society then educational ethics and principles need to be practised in reality. Education must be brought out of the books to fulfil the dream of a society where women are truly empowered.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Education, Communication, Awareness, Gender, Society

The Personal is Political: Women Empowerment and Women's Writing Across Margins

“Solidarity between women can be a powerful force of change, and can influence future development in ways favourable not only to women but also to men.”

— Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*

Women empowerment extends beyond the courtyard to navigate across the uncharted territory of the international literary landscape. It infuses renewed zeal in women to empower themselves by creating a literary trajectory of their own. The personal is no more veiled by the restrictions imposed on women because political awareness and intervention has opened new avenues for women. Participation of women in this developing scenario is indeed an optimistic step towards empowerment. Such growth is not inaccurate but factual. Women

from the margins are connecting with the mainstream in voicing their concerns and designing a future for themselves. The contribution of literature has ignited enormous passion in women to verbalize their plight and address their issues candidly. Understanding of literature and education of young minds has promoted women empowerment across the globe. Fictional works of feminist authors like Nawal El Saadawi, Tehmina Durrani, Toni Morrison, Faiqa Mansab, and Arundhati Roy have inculcated a new wave of activism in women, irrespective of geographical diversity. Impact of fiction on women empowerment is a sphere of infinite opportunities and hope. Fiction has integrated women at large and unveiled some issues that were previously ignored. It has also drawn attention towards those aspects of womanhood that have been brutally maligned by the socio-political hegemonic powers.

This paper aims to draw the attention of the society towards the importance of promoting literary efforts in order to create a better atmosphere for women. Education is important but women must be allowed to practice and participate in literary activities so that they can practice what they learn. The aim of education must be the creation of individuals with not only an educated mind, but an educated soul that can put to practice the ideals of education in real life. The ideas and principles of education, hence, must be routinely applied in real life if we truly wish to create a women-friendly environment without gender inequality. Women empowerment and women's writing are undeniably associated to each other. Women empower women by means of their writing. The female writers verbalize the predicaments of women and draw the attention of the people towards them. In terms of education it must be noted that women empowerment is to a great extent dependent on the education of women not only across India but beyond the national borders. It might seem shocking but it is true that many women still have no freedom to attend school. Their social and economic condition is such that they are bound to quit their dream of going to the school. They are either forcibly married, or shackled under the banner of domestic duties.

Organizations that impart education must reach such sections of society and convince people to participate in the literary endeavours. If women remain away from basic education then they will never be able to free themselves, or learn to validate their own selves. Instead of solely blaming patriarchy for our condition we must see how much are we ready to change our lives by educating ourselves. As affirmed by Mahatma Gandhi “Be the change you wish to see” (n.pag).

The other section of our society that has been well-schooled is an active participant in the women empowerment struggle. But this economically and professionally sound segment of our society is not fully aware of the actual condition of female literacy in remote regions of our country. Hence, this section barely steps out of its comfort zone, and is often accused of adopting an elitist approach. We discuss theoretical implications of women empowerment at every workshop, seminar, or conference, but we fail to put that theory into practice. We fight for any cause till it does not disrupt our routine, or interfere with our sense of solace. If we feel that somehow we are getting deeply involved in any issue that does not affect us directly we either abandon it, or condemn it. Problem-solving and empowering women are not issues to be discussed over coffee mugs and cozy couches. Such empowerment needs knowledge of the exact predicament of women so as to find valid and functional solutions. Our idealism will not profit us if we fail to implement our thoughts into actions. Unless we claim our womanhood by educating our mind and begin to respect ourselves we will be lost in the labyrinth of aggressive feminism, verbal blame-games and sugar-coated dreams of emancipation and empowerment. In America, when Afro-American female authors began to create a literary canon for themselves they were condemned. White women disrespected their cause and kept aloof. Hence women of colour and Afro-American women forged their own movement and created their own identity. They did not seek approval from the hegemonic powers of their nation. They knew that often women victimize women worse than men.

Hence a womanist ideology is a practical solution to many of our problems because our society is inhabited by both the sexes and everyone has a right to live in harmony with the other. Female authors like Nawal El Saadawi, Tehmina Durrani, Toni Morrison, Faiqa Mansab, and Arundhati Roy are relentlessly writing in order to arouse awareness among women. They aspire to awaken a spirit of hope and courage among women to confront challenges and articulate their distress. They unveil the ugly face of patriarchy, economic deprivation, sexual perversion and abusive familial bonds. These writers not only portray the plight of women, they also lay emphasis on how women surrender their self-esteem and invalidate their own selves on account of others. Such mistakes weaken women and lead to their plight. Such literature is heuristic in nature. The suffering that women confront is ubiquitous and surpasses the geographical disparities. For example, a woman living in Egypt can be as oppressed as another living in America. Their issues may appear different but their internal condition and agony is the same.

Nawal El-Saadawi in *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) prompts questioning regarding the widespread neurosis in Egyptian women that hampers their intellectual growth and deprives them of their happiness. The novel was originally published in Arabic in 1975 and in English in the year 1983. The author is a psychiatrist who visits the Qanatir prison to examine the women prisoners. The author has a strong desire to talk to a woman prisoner called Firdaus who seems to have an aura that draws the author towards her. The trauma of this female prisoner on the verge of execution is graphically narrated in the novel. The psychiatrist-author withdraws into a dreamlike state as Firdaus begins to outline her life. They remain in the prison cell as she narrates her life to the author. Her life is a chronicle of distress and abuse at the hands of both her family members and the men whom she meets in Cairo after migrating from her village. Her parents die and she is brought up by her uncle, who exploits her in an incestuous relationship with her. She enters prostitution, quits this flesh trade after a

spell self-realization, falls in love with her colleague Ibrahim who later betrays her, returns back to prostitution to earn money and finally kills a pimp called Marzouk, who tries to snatch away her money and perpetually threatens her. When she confesses her sin she is imprisoned in Qanatir prison and sentenced to death penalty. She rejects human contact and does not file a mercy petition against her execution. However, the female physician serves as a mode of communication between Firdaus and the outside world. She listens to the story with diligence and writes it in the memory of Firdaus. Firdaus faced death because she dared to speak against the society and reveal its true belligerence and brutality. The ugly face of the society urges women to trade their bodies for survival. This novel from Egypt reflects on the nature of exploitation may it be in form of prostitution, slut-shaming by the society, incest, heterosexual love or marital assault that women undergo irrespective of their geographical disparity. Saadawi blends details of the prisoner's life in the psychiatric details of the mind and creates a dream-like atmosphere. The idea behind the novel can be summed up in the words of the female protagonist:

For death and truth are similar in that they both require a great courage if one wishes to face them. And truth is like death in that it kills. When I killed I did it with truth not with a knife. That is why they are afraid and in a hurry to execute me. They do not fear my knife. It is my truth that frightens them. (140)

Fictional writings of renowned female author Tehmina Durrani provide a rostrum for debate on repression of women under the banner of patriarchy in Pakistan. Her characters in the novel entitled *Blasphemy* (1998) are living corpses that experience the worst form of abuse and insult. The religious obligations are misused and manipulated in order to support patriarchy and bury women behind the extremes of veil or 'purdah'. Their right to live freely is snatched away by the master of the house who is a Pir, a religious head, who presides over a grave that is worshipped by the people. He is a tyrant who abuses his wife throughout the

narrative to such an extent that she begins to hope for his death. Women characters in this text try to fight in whatever way they can. The darker side of matrimony is artistically depicted by Durrani, when a young girl is not allowed to choose her life partner, but is pushed into a loveless marriage by her greedy mother. The novel is an anguished account of her life in the house of the lewd Pir Sain, her husband. Conflict between tradition and modernity added to the misery of the women characters. The cyclic episodes of sexual maltreatment, maternity, pre-mature deaths, addiction and prostitution are the wide spread issues dealt within the novel. Women in the novel try to empower themselves by means of shared sisterhood. A female reader can draw inspiration from this text by understanding how women victimize women for their selfish goals, and that a woman must stand independently against the opposing forces in order to attain freedom from oppression. Strong will-power and determination are crucial for survival of women. They should even help each other in challenging times. Captivity makes the central character of the novel comprehend the true meaning of freedom. Love for nature and ordinary things kept her humanity alive. However, in the end she feigns death in order to escape a horrifying future after the death of her husband at the hands of another female servant. She had known about this murder and hoped for this because her husband was an inhuman womanizer, murderer and a child molester. These words of Heer about her husband in *Blasphemy* justly explain the predicament of women in a severely perverted society where divine teachings are maneuvered by the patriarchs:

To me, my husband was my son's murderer. He was also my daughter's molester. A parasite nibbling on the Holy Book, he was Lucifer, holding me by the throat and driving me to sin every night. He was Bhai's destroyer, Amma Sain's tormentor, Ma's humbler and the people's exploiter. He was the rapist of orphans and the fiend that fed on the weak. But over and above all

this, he was known to be the man closest to Allah, the one who could reach Him and save us. (143)

Another prolific female author is the Afro-American writer called Toni Morrison. She has won the Nobel Prize and the Pulitzer Prize. Her fictional and non-fictional writing has fetched her great fame and added to the cult of Afro-American writing. She empowers women by means of her writing and inculcates in them a sense of self-esteem, an urge to confront life independently and without being victimized by sexism, classism or racism. She speaks for the Afro-American population by celebrating Afro-American cultural roots, folklores, music, oral traditions and rituals. In her novel *God Help the Child* (2015), she re-establishes her literary supremacy. This novel is set in the contemporary moment. It conveys a very important phase in a child's life and it is this phase that determines the future life of the child as an adult. The female protagonist is a woman named Lula Ann Bridewell, who likes to call herself Bride. She is young, energetic and charming with a deep blue-black skin and is a part of the cosmetics industry. She was never loved by her mother because of her intense dark skin, her father deserted them and she longed for respect and love throughout her childhood. However, in order to win her mother's affection and attention she falsely accused an innocent woman of a heinous crime. Later as an adult Bride revisits this woman but is received with hostility. Bride's lover Booker abandons her and she begins to travel in search of him. In her journey she takes shelter in the house of a hippie family, who helps her to recover. She meets a girl called Rain in their house; it is revealed that Rain has been terribly abused by her own mother who was a whore. The story ends on a positive note with Booker and Bride's union. However, the over-powering theme of child abuse and racism make the novel a sharp satire on the idea of a happy world. The protagonist of the novel empowers herself against the oddities of her life. She confronts her past and tries to make peace with the wrong she had committed. Her power to re-align her life and put all the pieces together to

create the figure of a strong female is commendable. The novel gives a clear and genuine picture of child abuse in America along with the enigmatic portrayal of an elegant, independent and fierce woman who dresses only in shades of white, irrespective of her dark blue-black skin. She celebrates her blackness and takes pride in her beauty. She conveys the message of Morrison that promotes confidence in women regarding their own bodies and a sense of pride and self-esteem. The basic advice behind this novel of Morrison is that “What you do to children matters. And they might never forget” (*GHTC* 43).

In Faiqa Mansab’s novel *This House of Clay and Water* (2017) the author presents a complicated feminist discourse that revolves around two women and a transgender. In this novel Mansab subverts the conventions of love by portraying artfully an amorous relationship between a married woman named Nida and a hermaphrodite called Bhanggi. The novel is set in the vibrant city of Lahore, and the narrative opens in the Anarkali market that was named after the memorable slave- girl Anarkali who fell in love with the royal prince Salim. She was however, entombed by Akbar for this amorous relationship with the prince. This novel aptly puts forth the idea of forbidden love. It is taboo for a woman to fall in love, and a greater degree of sin if she is married. The hermaphrodite (transgender) is brutally murdered by the woman’s powerful husband when their amorous relationship is revealed. Suffocation of women under dominating husbands, the breeding nexus of escort services, prostitution, child-abuse, and exploitation of the transgender people are some of the thematic concerns of this novel. Both *Blasphemy* and *This House of Clay and Water* swirl with the superficiality of the conjugal unions that are highly valued by the society. Women suffer post- marriage at the hands of their husbands, their in-laws, and are captivated in the shackles of domesticity and motherhood. Women in *This House of Clay and Water* go against the established social mores so as to free themselves from sexual slavery. Both female characters, Nida and Sasha reclaim their identity after engaging in their personal struggles courageously. In Durrani’s

Blasphemy the central character named Heer, feigns death in order to live and to begin a new life with her lost love, whereas in Mansab's *This House of Clay and Water* the female protagonist Nida, after the killing of her beloved man by her husband takes on his role as a qalandar (spiritual person) at the shrine. Love is given a multidimensional appeal in these novels. The female authors create harrowing narratives that portray a severely orthodox and vindictive society. These words convey the essence of the novel, "We hope to drown the murmurs of our paralysed conscience by screaming about other people's sins" (THCW 20).

In the current novel of Arundhati Roy, an ace Indian novelist, social activist and essayist, the narrative of female anguish and empowerment is dealt with precision. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) is a genre-bending novel of Roy that examines the complex social and political trends in India that influence the immediate reality of everyday life. Though the themes navigated by Roy are extensive and all-embracing, yet at the core of the novel is a strong craving for self-assertion, quest for unconditioned companionship and mutual respect that is every individual's right. This novel is a stunning tapestry of varying narratives, passionate interludes, a wide array of characters and a gamut of significant issues. It deals with the lives of transgenders in India, specifically a hermaphrodite called Anjum (born Aftab) in Shahjahanabad of old Delhi area. Her mother concealed her true identity and said that she had given birth to a boy due to her husband's gender preference. However, the truth was ultimately revealed and Anjum abandoned her residence to take shelter in Khwabgah, a home for the helpless and homeless transgenders. Anjum's life is tumultuous and she finally lands in a graveyard where she builds a shelter called Jannat guest house for the needy and victimized like Dayachand later called Saddam in the novel, who was a Dalit before converting to Islam. He converted in order to save himself from communal slaughter of the Dalits by the upper caste Hindus. Another character called Tilottama is a woman who is a dissident by nature. She also suffers all her life to survive in this harsh society without

being judged, or marginalized. Zainab, a female character, is an adopted daughter of Anjum. She fights against all problems and becomes a fashion designer. All women in the novel fight for their survival. The transgenders also indulge in constant emotional, biological and social struggle to articulate their agony. This novel makes a mark in the genre of novelistic discourse because of its ability to allow participation of even the remotest of people. Those who exist on the periphery are brought towards the mainstream and the narrative moves towards collective welfare. The essence of this richly layered narrative focuses on the following words:

How to tell a shattered story?

By slowly becoming everybody.

No.

By slowly becoming everything. (*TMUH* 436)

The international climate allows for a catalytic debate upon issues of female empowerment and emancipation. The empowerment of women across the globe cannot be achieved by dormant policy- making and impractical negotiations. A solidified approach to the problems, vehement execution of policies for safeguarding the rights of women and concrete steps towards female literacy can ensure emancipation of women in its true form. Rehabilitation of works by women authors of the past, escalation of translation process, promotion of gynotexts and inclusion of literature produced by female authors even from the most obscure regions of the globe must be promoted. Critical evaluation of literature from those regions of the world that are not in the mainstream will enable the writers to connect with the contemporary literary scenario and enhance their readership worldwide. Women empowerment by means of women's literary production is a gigantic leap towards creating a sanctuary for freedom of thought and expression. The creative energy of the female authors

must be channelized to reach the most obscure regions of the world. Their works open a persuasive window into the hearts of the female characters portrayed in their writing that grapple with questions of womanhood.

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